

Did Cuba Murder JFK?

A New Look at Some Old Puzzles: The CIA, Castro and Revenge

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By James Johnston

THE POSSIBILITY of a Cuban connection in the assassination of John F. Kennedy has been debated for years. In 1976, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence disclosed that at the time of Kennedy's death the CIA was plotting with a high-level Cuban official, code-named AMLASH, to assassinate Fidel Castro. It also disclosed that in 1967 President Johnson had ordered an internal CIA investigation when he learned that an underworld figure claimed Castro had known of the CIA's plot and had dispatched "teams" to retaliate.

The CIA plot to kill Castro is by now well known. But at the time the Warren Commission report on Kennedy's death was issued, neither the commission members nor Johnson was aware of it. Less well known even today is how well the chronology of the AMLASH plot fits into events surrounding the assassination. What it suggests is that the CIA had reason to believe that Nov. 22, 1963, could be a dangerous date.

Following is a meshing of events in the AMLASH plot and the Kennedy assassination. Details about the AMLASH operation are drawn from the Senate committee report.

After Castro assumed power in Cuba in 1959, the CIA launched a number of operations to oust him, including the use of underworld contacts to assassinate him. These operations were terminated by early 1963. The figure called AMLASH had never been involved in these operations, although he had been in occasional contact with the CIA.

In September 1963, the CIA again made contact with AMLASH. He told them he wanted the United States to invade Cuba, or as an alternative he could attempt an "inside job." In later meetings, AMLASH detailed plans for a coup, the first step of which would be Castro's assassination.

Within days, Castro gave Associated Press reporter Daniel Harker an unusual, impromptu, three-hour in-

terview in which he warned against U.S. support of terrorist plans to eliminate Cuban leaders. If U.S. leaders aided such plans, Castro warned, they would not be safe. The CIA took Castro's threat seriously but rejected the possibility that he might strike at government officials in the United States.

Several weeks after Castro's threat, Lee Harvey Oswald moved his wife and child from New Orleans to Dallas and then set off by bus for Mexico City. While there, Oswald visited both the Soviet and Cuban diplomatic establishments. According to documents provided by the Cuban government after JFK's assassination, Oswald had applied for a visa, but it was subsequently denied. When Oswald returned to Dallas, he moved alone into a rooming house under an assumed name. A short time later, he obtained work at the Texas School Book Depository.

Meanwhile, the CIA had continued its meetings with AMLASH. He pressed for evidence of high-level U.S. support for his plan, suggesting a face-to-face meeting with Robert Kennedy. To satisfy AMLASH, Desmond FitzGerald, head of CIA Cuban operations, met with him on Oct. 29, posing as Robert Kennedy's personal representative. He assured AMLASH that his ideas had support at the highest level of government. In fact, FitzGerald's subordinates had advised against the meeting. They feared that FitzGerald, a recognizable senior CIA officer, might be identified if foreign intelligence services monitored the meeting.

Though AMLASH seemed satisfied with the meeting, he later told the CIA that he wanted proof of the president's support as well. He also wanted explosives, rifles with telescopic sights and a poison pen to use for self-defense. In other words, he wanted the CIA to provide the weapons for Castro's assassination.

On Nov. 1, Oswald rented a post office box in Dallas as part of his often-baffling activities on behalf of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (FPCC). Oswald had attempted to start a New Orleans chapter of the

FPCC in August 1963 and had written to the FPCC national president. It would be difficult to start a chapter in the South, said the reply. The only successful Southern chapter was in Tampa and had been personally organized by the national president.

Kennedy was scheduled to appear in Tampa during the week of Nov. 17, one of several appearances that week that included, on the 22nd, a visit to Dallas. These trips had been widely reported in the press; the planned Dallas visit was reported in Dallas papers the previous September.

But Kennedy's itinerary took him to Tampa and Miami first. Living in Tampa at that time was a young

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Cuban-born drifter named Gilberto Polcarpo Lopez. Lopez is of interest because his situation so strikingly paralleled Oswald's. According to intelligence agency files, Lopez left Cuba in 1960 to avoid being drafted. He visited Cuba briefly in 1962, then returned to Florida and married.

Like Oswald, he had recently applied for a Cuban visa but it had been denied. Like Oswald, he was living alone because of alleged marital problems. Like Oswald, he was in contact with the Fair Play for Cuba Committee. In fact, Lopez spent Sunday, Nov. 17, at the home of the president of the Tampa chapter of the FPCC. He was reportedly there waiting for an important phone call from Cuba giving him a "go ahead order" to leave the United States, but the call did not come.

In Dallas on that same Nov. 17, Oswald was spending the weekend alone, neither visiting nor calling his wife. She had the phone number of the rooming house but not the address. When Oswald later learned that Marina had given that number to someone else, he became angry and admitted he was living at the rooming house under an assumed name.

By Nov. 17, after weeks of silence on the matter, the CIA had decided to meet AM-

LASH's demands for assurance of the president's support. Evidence suggests the CIA prepared passages for inclusion in the Tampa speech which would signal AMLASH that the president was behind him.

According to press accounts of the speech, Kennedy described the Castro government as a "small band of conspirators" forming a "barrier" which, "once removed," would ensure U.S. support for progressive goals in Cuba. This was the signal of support that AMLASH wanted, but it was also the very thing Castro had warned against in September. Importantly, the Senate intelligence committee found that, despite the Tampa speech and FitzGerald's claims to AMLASH, neither John nor Robert Kennedy knew about the AMLASH operation.

On Tuesday, Nov. 19, AMLASH told the CIA that he planned to return to Cuba immediately. The next day, Wednesday, Nov. 20, the CIA called AMLASH and scheduled a meeting for Friday, Nov. 22. When AMLASH asked if the meeting would be "interesting," the CIA cryptically told him it was the meeting he had "requested."

This presumably meant that the CIA was prepared to provide AMLASH with weapons and evidence of presidential approval. On the same day, Lopez obtained a visa to Mexico and left Tampa for Texas, but what he did there is not known.

On Nov. 21, Lee Harvey Oswald retrieved his rifle from the home where his family was staying. As Oswald arrived for work at the Texas School Book Depository on Nov. 22, Castro invited French journalist Jean Daniel to spend the entire day with him. Daniel's account of that day, "When Castro Heard the News," was printed in *The New Republic*. According to Daniel, after hearing that Lyndon Johnson was sworn in as president, Castro asked, "What authority does he exercise over the CIA?"

Also on Friday, Nov. 22, the CIA met with AMLASH. It gave him a copy of the President's Tampa speech and told him that FitzGerald had helped write it. The CIA then gave him the poison pen he wanted and promised that explosives and rifles with telescopic sights would be delivered to him in Cuba. As the meeting ended, the participants learned of the

President's assassination. A CIA participant could not recall if AMLASH left the meeting with the incriminating poison pen, but he was later told by FitzGerald to omit mention of it in his written summary of the meeting.

The day after the assassination, Lopez crossed the border from Texas and went to Mexico City. Using an expired U.S. passport and a Cuban courtesy visa, Lopez was the only passenger on a Nov. 27 Cubana Airlines flight to Havana. The CIA later received a never-substantiated report that Lopez was somehow involved in the assassination.

This sequence of events may of course be simply an unconnected series of coincidences. There is no direct evidence to prove that the AMLASH operation and the JFK assassination were related. In sworn testimony, CIA officials responsible for the AMLASH operation have denied seeing any connection between the two at the time.

Following release of the Senate intelligence committee's report, a CIA task force prepared a report that dismissed any such connection, arguing that even if he were a provocateur, "AMLASH had no basis for believing that he had CIA support for much of anything." The House Select Committee on Assassinations in its 1979 report was unable to find a connection either. Based solely on its review of intelligence files, the House committee further concluded that the actions of Lopez (only the House report identifies him by name) were not connected to the assassination.

Still, the chronology is powerful and suggests motivations. If either Castro or forces seeking his ouster knew of the AMLASH operation, each may have concluded—for opposite reasons—that it gave them an opportunity for action.

To Castro, even an unsuccessful attempt would demonstrate that he had the capability to retaliate if the CIA continued to plot against him. Faced with this reality, the CIA might have backed off. To Castro's opponents, possibly including AMLASH, an attempt on Kennedy that appeared directed by Castro might goad the United States into more direct conflict with Cuba. Indeed, AMLASH initially had proposed an invasion of Cuba and later expressed frustrations with the slow pace of the CIA's response to his proposals.

Although neither the Warren Commission nor President Johnson knew of the secret AMLASH operation at the time, others did. Even the FBI learned from one of its sources in early October 1963 that AMLASH was in

